You’ve seen journalism evolve over the years, with the rise of new technologies. Has this changed newsgathering for better or for worse?

Social media is a mixed bag. The prevalence of fake news has been a huge issue and one we haven’t quite grappled with yet. We saw it in the US during the 2016 presidential election. We saw it in the UK with Brexit. We saw it in the Ukrainian election recently.

At the same time, social media means news and stories can travel in ways that they didn’t before. Stories can really get out and spread. It’s not like when you open a newspaper or watch a broadcast to see a particular story – and then it goes away. Rather, with social media you can find out about stories long after they’ve actually run in the original outlet. It lets stories live a longer life than they would otherwise – even if it means that those that aren’t true can also spread in the same way.

One of my first jobs out of college was at the International Reporting Project, a journalists’ association which no longer exists. At the time we were promoting digital video, which was a revolution. It meant you had ‘one-man bands’ who could go out anywhere in the world and do video stories without traditional, big camera crews. Now, with mobile phones it’s even easier for people to produce almost film-quality videos in a way that wasn’t possible 20 years ago. People in the developing world can now afford this equipment.

Technology really has made journalism more accessible. But it has also killed the revenue stream for a lot of outlets. Yes, we have this great technology to produce content with, but if there’s no outlet or viable way to make a living then what can you do? It’s a double-edged sword with technology – it’s helped and hurt journalism at the same time.

Although it is easier to report from all over the world, it also seems more dangerous than ever. How concerned are you about journalists being killed on the job?

It concerns me a great deal. It’s part and parcel with the rise of a new kind of authoritarianism. The prototype of that would be Vladimir Putin’s Russia, which has the trappings of democracy, but it takes a new approach to suppressing the press. It’s a real problem. Even the US is now listed as ‘mostly free’ according to the annual
World Press Freedom Index. It’s hardly ideal. I’m really concerned for press freedom around the world, but it’s also part of the bigger issue of the rise of populism/nationalism/authoritarianism.

Has the #NataliPrize reassured you that we are still attracting brave new talents to journalism?

Absolutely! The prize nominees have shown that there are people out there willing to take risks to get the truth out to people, to tell stories, and make sure that things that shouldn’t be supressed are put out there.

I’m impressed by the level of bravery and ingenuity I’ve seen in the #NataliPrize. As dangerous as it is to be a journalist today, there are people out there taking risks because they care so much. I’m less worried about there not being people willing to become journalists. But I am worried about the safety of those people because it’s clearly becoming more dangerous. People are hostile to journalists when the truth runs counter to what they want.

Just telling the story is enough.

Do risk and danger come into account when you review the applications?

It’s a factor. The rigour of the reporting is also important to me. You can have a brave reporter telling a story, but if it is not properly covered from all sides then that’s definitely a mark against it. The quality of the writing is important too. There are lots of different factors that weigh in. But bravery and a willingness to take risks to tell a story are definitely important.

The #NataliPrize rewards development journalism. Do you think a journalist can make a difference?

I think stories always make a difference. Look at the Flint water crisis in the US where a town – Flint, Michigan - was poisoned by lead because of government malpractice. If journalism wasn’t there to tell that story, then people might never have known that this was an issue.

Journalists don’t need to make an explicit case for whatever they are reporting on. The story will make that case implicitly. A lot of the biggest stories of corruption that we have around the world wouldn’t come out without journalists.

There’s a fine line between activism and journalism. I lean towards a more neutral style, where just telling the story is enough. You don’t need to make a more impassioned case, you don’t need to judge. But you should give the reader or viewer the tools to make their own decision about whether this issue is important.

To give an example, at the Pulitzer Center we recently funded a story looking at Saudi bombing in Yemen. There was a group of villagers in Yemen digging a well, and the Saudis bombed them: people were killed and injured, including children. The reporter found a serial number on one of the bombs and traced it back to a factory in Arizona, and then traced the whole life cycle of the bomb from Arizona to Yemen where these people were killed. The story was given out in the House of Representatives in the US, to say, ‘This is why we should not be funding or supporting
the Saudi war in Yemen. So that’s an example of a story that had an impact.

#NataliPrize traditionally rewarded written journalism. Can we expect a shift in focus in years to come on new media/video?

I think there should be a greater focus on video storytelling. Some of the best journalism I’ve seen is short-form video, and I’d love to see more of that. Video that’s really well produced opens up a lot of possibilities that print doesn’t: it makes it more immediate for people. With print, you have to sort of imagine the people.

ABOUT

The Lorenzo Natali Prize was launched in 1992 to recognise and celebrate excellence in reporting on sustainable development issues. The Prize also gives a voice to those whose vital message is often overlooked or ignored. It was created by DG DEVCO, and named after Lorenzo Natali, a precursor of European development policy.

Jeff Barrus, who joined the Pulitzer Center as Communications Director in 2016, is a graduate of the University of Maryland with 20 years of experience in communications.

Jeff began his career in 1998 at National Public Radio, and for 11 years he served in a variety of communication roles at Johns Hopkins University, including at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and the International Reporting Project.

Before joining the Pulitzer Center, Jeff served as Deputy Director of Digital Communications at the Atlantic Council, where he oversaw the Council’s editorial team, website, social media, and email platforms. He also spent time at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, where he managed digital marketing.

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